

From Convincing to Understanding: Developing Dispositions of Torah Study

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Screen capture Beit Rabban website

By Lisa Exler

A group of fourth grade students sat in the opening circle of their *Chumash* class, preparing to break into *chavruta* (paired learning) to discuss a section from *sefer Shemot*. Their teacher asked, “When you learn in *chavruta*, is your goal to convince your partner that your interpretation is correct?” A student responded by saying, “No. My job is to make sure that my *chavruta* understands why I think what I think.”

As we approach *Shavuot* – the celebration of the giving of the Torah – this story invites us to ask: How can we, as a Jewish community, make sure that we are not only giving the Torah to our children, but also giving them the tools to engage with it and each other deeply and respectfully?

Nearly one year ago, [Mechon Hadar](#), in partnership with [Beit Rabban Day School](#), released the [Standards for Fluency in Jewish Text and Practice](#), as an attempt to contribute to the answer to this question. This educational resource paints a portrait of fluency for students in nursery through eighth grade – articulating skills to be developed, defining a canon of texts to be mastered, and formulating dispositions to be cultivated so that students can grow into empowered Jewish adults who can carry Torah into the future.

In developing these standards, and in implementing them at Beit Rabban, I have found that these dispositions – or attitudes towards learning – are much harder to describe, teach, and assess than skills or the content of the canon of texts. Consider some of the dispositions that are included in the *Tanakh* section of the fluency standards:

- Students are rigorous and meticulous in their efforts to translate and comprehend the text precisely.
- Students seek to understand the text on its own terms and in its own context before adding their own voice and interpretation.
- Students approach the text with curiosity and inquisitiveness, asking questions and using critical thinking skills in order to deepen their understanding and develop their own interpretation.
- Students search for answers to their questions in the text itself, in the words of classical commentators, and in the ideas and interpretations of their peers and teachers.
- Students view themselves as being in relationship with the text and with those who interpret the text across space and time.

These dispositions are no less important (and some would argue perhaps more important) than a skill like “decoding letters and vowels” or content knowledge like “names, profiles, and relationships of main and secondary characters.” Yet, I struggled with how exactly to articulate them when writing the fluency standards document and have continued to grapple with how to design instructional strategies for explicitly teaching and cultivating them at Beit Rabban.

This is why it was so exciting to me to see these dispositions in action in the fourth grade class at [Boston’s Jewish Community Day School](#) when I visited there last month. The fourth grade teachers, Ayelet Lipton and Michelle Janoschek, are using the Pedagogy of Partnership, an approach to teaching and learning, developed by Dr. Orit Kent and Allison Cook, that focuses on deepening students’ intellectual, ethical and spiritual engagement with texts, teachers and peers.

In addition to the story above, here are three more vignettes from the *Chumash* class that I observed that illustrate how students with these dispositions learn Torah. After each vignette I quote the disposition from the [fluency standards](#) that it illustrates.

- Also in the opening circle, one student referred to the *chavruta* triangle (the iconic symbol of the Pedagogy of Partnership). This triangle is a visual depiction of the three-way relationship between student, student and text, and inside of the triangular “playing field,” the “hockey-puck” represents the conversation itself and how the focus moves in between each of these partners. The student questioned the goal of keeping the “hockey puck” in the center of the triangle, representing equal participation of both students and the text. He asked, “How can the hockey puck ever really be in the middle? If one student is talking then isn’t the hockey puck always closer to whoever is talking? And we don’t want both partners to talk at the same time!” Another student responded, “But if the other student is doing attentive listening then they’re also participating, so the hockey puck is right in the middle.” These students clearly “view themselves as being in relationship with the text and with those who interpret the text” and take the responsibilities of that relationship quite seriously.

- The first thing students did in *chavruta* was to independently re-read the text and they kept the text on the table between them as they engaged in conversation. This emphasis on the voice of the text demonstrated the dispositions of being “rigorous and meticulous in their efforts to translate and comprehend the text precisely” and “seeking to understand the text on its own terms and in its own context before adding their own voice and interpretation.”
- Students had prepared the day before by reading and translating the *pesukim* (verses) they would be discussing and had written “sticky notes” with their questions on them. Ayelet asked them to consider “which sticky notes will start a good discussion” and to start their conversation with those. These “sticky notes” demonstrated the disposition of “approaching the text with curiosity and inquisitiveness and asking questions and using critical thinking skills in order to deepen their understanding.”

Students studied in *chavruta* for over twenty minutes and during that time, the room was buzzing with animated conversation. Towards the end of class, when Ayelet tried to bring students’ discussions to a close, students begged for more time to continue. Clearly, these students’ skills, content knowledge and dispositions combined to nurture in them not only a sense of ownership of the text, but also a true love of Torah study.

The Fluency Standards together with the Pedagogy of Partnership can transform classrooms and schools, empowering students to own their relationships to Jewish texts and to one another. I hope that as the Fluency Standards and the Pedagogy of Partnership make their way into more schools, articulating and teaching these dispositions, as well as strengthening text skills and content knowledge, will be the norm, rather than the exception. And even more than that, we will be educating a generation of students who not only know how to read and interpret the Torah, but who do so by deeply listening to the text and to one another, joyfully co-creating a tapestry of new and colorful understandings of our sacred ancient texts.

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